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THE CONTENTIOUSNESS OF MODERN NOVEL-WRITERS.

BY AGNES REPPLIER.

It is a serious age in which we live, and there is a painful sense of responsibility on the part of those who have assigned to themselves the task of directing their fellow creatures, not only in matters spiritual, but in all that pertains to intellectual or artistic life. That we need guidance is plain enough ; the helping hand of true and patient criticism was never more welcome than now ; but to be driven, or rather hounded, along the pleasant paths of literature by severe and self-elected teachers, all alike innocent of credentials, is not the surest way of reaching the best that has been known and thought in the world. Indeed, there is one sunny field of letters, which resembles a country fair, packed close with booths from which each eager merchant vociferates the excellence of his own wares, and decries those of his friend and neighbor. The most ardent novel-lover stands aghast before this flood of mingled eulogy and denunciation ; and he may perhaps be pardoned if, in a moment of irritation, he is fain to tell the combatants, all plucking at his sleeve, to please go on writing their fiction as well as in them lies, and he will decide for himself which of their books to read.

For it is not in the nature of man to relish a too strenuous dictatorship, especially in matters which he cannot be made to believe are of very urgent importance. When a certain critic says that American literature *must* be distinctly and unmistakably American, that it *must* be faithful to American conditions, it is difficult not to reply that there is no "must" for us of his devising. Let this critic write his stories as he thinks best, and his many admirers will read them with satisfaction ; but his con-

trol is necessarily limited to his own literary offspring. He cannot expect to whip other people's children. When Mr. Hall Caine tells the good people of Edinburgh that the novelist is his brother's keeper, that it is "evasive cowardice" for him to deny his responsibility, and that the mere fact of his having written a book proves that he feels himself something stronger than his neighbor who hasn't, we only protest, as novel-readers, against assuming any share in this spirit of acute conscientiousness. Personally, I do not believe that it is the duty of any man or woman to write a story. In nine cases out of ten, there would be greater merit in leaving it unwritten. But even granting that the author goes to work, like Mr. Caine, from the strictest sense of moral liability, there can be no corresponding obligation on our part to read the tale. We hear too much of our failure to accept and appreciate the gifts which the liberal gods are now providing for us, and it would be more modest, as well as more dignified, if those who set the feast would forbear to extol its merits.

As for the rival schools of fiction, they may as well consent to live in amity side by side. If they don't "fill one home with glee," they fill many homes with that moderate gratification which lightens a weary hour. Each has its adherents; each gives its allotted share of pleasure to people who know very well what they like, and who will never be converted by arguments into reading what they don't. It is useless to tell a man who is half way through *The House of the Wolf*, and oblivious for one blessed hour to everything in the world save the fate and fortunes of three French lads, that "the romantic novel represents a juvenile and, intellectually considered, lower stage of development than the realistic novel." He doesn't care the value of a ha'penny for stages of development. He is not reading *The House of the Wolf* by way of mental or moral discipline. He is not to be persuaded into exchanging it unfinished for *The Apprenticeship of Lemuel Barker*, because more "creative intelligence" is required to tell a story without incident—when there is, so to speak, no story to tell. What is it to him, if the book were hard or easy to write? Why should he be reminded perpetually by realists and veritists of the arduous nature of their task? He did not put them to work. The one and only thing which is of vital interest to him is the tale itself. The author's point of view, his sense of personal responsibility,

the artistic limits which he sets himself, the difficulties which he piles in his own way and heroically overcomes, the particular platform from which he addresses the universe, his stern adherence to actualities, his truthful treatment of material—all these things about which we hear so much mean nothing, and less than nothing to the reader. Give him the book, and he asks to hear no more. He judges it by some standard of his own, which may not bear the test of critical analysis, but which is more convincing to him than the recorded opinion of the writer. The wife of his bosom and his college-bred daughter are powerless to persuade him that Tourguéneff is a better novelist than Dickens. And when he stoutly resists this pressure from within, this subtle and penetrating influence of feminine culture, it is worse than useless to attack him from without with supercilious remarks anent juvenility, and the immature stage of his development.

It must be admitted that the realistic story-writers are more prone to tell us about themselves and their methods than are the heroic narrators of improbable, but none the less interesting, romances. Mr. Rider Haggard, indeed, from time to time insinuates that he, too, is trammelled by the obstinate nature of facts, and that there is a restraining and troublesome ingredient of truth mingled with his fiction. But this is surely a pleasant jest on Mr. Haggard's part. We cannot believe that he ever denied himself an incident in the entire course of his literary life. Mr. Stevenson defended with characteristic spirit those keenly imaginative and adventurous tales which have made the whole world kin, and to whose splendid inspiration we owe perhaps the added heritage of *Kidnapped* and *Treasure Island*. Mr. Lang throws down his gauntlet unhesitatingly in behalf of romance, and fights her battles with joyous and animating zeal. But Mr. Lang is not preëminently a novelist. He only drops into fiction now and then, as Mr. Wegg dropped into poetry, in the intervals of more urgent avocations. Moreover, it is seldom from these authors that we gather our minute information concerning the duties and difficulties of novel-writing. They have been too wary to betray the secrets of the craft.

Small wonder the realistic novelist finds his task a hard one. Small wonder he says so much about the difficulties which beset him. He does his duty by Mary Jane, provides her with a lover,

and laboriously strives to smoothen the path of courtship. What must his feelings be when the ungrateful hussy refuses, after all his trouble, to marry the young man. Or perhaps she declines to be called Mary Ann at all, and insists that her name is Arabella, to his great annoyance and discomfiture. Lurid possibilities of revolt suggest themselves on every side, until the unhappy novel writer, notwithstanding his detestation of the "feudal ideal," as illustrated by Sir Walter Scott, must sigh occasionally for "*les Droits Seigneuriaux*," which would enable him to hang a few of his rebellious puppets, "*pour encourager les autres*." It may be worth while, in this connection, to remind him of the absolutely arbitrary manner in which Mr. Anthony Trollope, that true master of realism, disposed of Mrs. Proudie. If ever there was a character in fiction whom we should have trusted to hold her own against her author, Mrs. Proudie was that character. No reasonable creature will for a moment pretend that an amiable, easy-going, middle-aged gentleman like Mr. Trollope was a match for the Bishop's wife, who had, in her day, routed many a stronger man. She had lived so long, too. In novel after novel she had played her vigorous part, until the right to go on living was hers by force of established usage and custom. Yet this is what happened. One morning Mr. Trollope, while writing in the Athenæum Club, enjoyed the salutary experience of hearing himself criticized, and very unfavorably criticized, by two of the club members. Among other things, they said they were tired of reading about the same people over and over again; they thought if a man had not wit enough to evolve new characters he had better give up composing novels; and they objected especially to the perpetual domination of a woman so odious as Mrs. Proudie. At this juncture, Mr. Trollope could be silent no longer. He arose, confessed his identity, admitted his sin, and promised, by way of amendment, to kill Mrs. Proudie "before the week was out;" for were not the unfinished chapters of the *Last Chronicles of Barset* lying at that moment on his table? And what is more he kept his word. He slew Mrs. Proudie, apparently quite oblivious of the fact that he was interfering unwarrantably with "nature's arrangement." I mention this incident to show that it is possible for a really determined author, who knows his rights and will have them, to overcome the resistance of the most obstinate character in his book.

For the rest it does not appear to the peace-loving reader that either the realist or the romancist has any very convincing arguments to offer in defence of his own exclusive orthodoxy. When the romancist affirms that his books lift men out of the sordid, painful realities of life into a healthier atmosphere, and make them temporarily forgetful of weariness and discontent, the realist very sensibly replies that he prefers facts, however sordid, to literary anodynes, and that it is his peculiar pleasure to grapple with things as they are. When the realist remarks in turn that nothing is easier than to write of love and war, but that it "lacks distinction," and shows a puerile and childish mind, the romancist merely chuckles, and clasps *Les Trois Mousquetaires* closer to his heart. Neither of the combatants is likely to be much affected by anything the other has to say, and we, outside the ring, can but echo Marianne Dashwood's sentiment, "This is admiration of a very particular kind." Mr. Stevenson and Mr. Lang have both distinctly recorded their debt of gratitude to Dumas. They cannot and do not claim that he is at all times an edifying writer; but many a weary hour has been brightened for them by the magic of his art, many a fretful doubt laid to rest by contact with his virile gaiety and courage. On the other hand, Mr. Boyesen has just as distinctly and just as sincerely assured us that Dumas had no charm nor spell for him, and he has added his impression that it is only those who, intellectually, never outgrow their boyhood who continue to delight in such "sensational chronicles of impossible deeds."

It is in this latter statement, which has been repeated over and over again with as many variations as a popular air, that the peculiar temper of the realist stands revealed. He is not only sure that stories of adventure are not to his liking, but he is equally sure that those who do enjoy them are his intellectual inferiors, or at least that they have not reached a mental maturity commensurate with his. He says so, with pleasing candor, whenever he has the opportunity. He is, in general, what the Ettrick Shepherd neatly terms "a bigot to his ain abeelities," and it would be hard to convince him that Dumas is none the less, in the words of Michelet, "a force of nature," because *he* is not personally stirred by that force, or because he knows a number of intelligent men who are no more affected than he is. For myself, I can but say that, being constrained once to spend two

days in Marseilles, the only thing that reconciled me to my fate was the sight of the gray Chateau d'If, standing, stern and solitary, amid the roughened waters. "Banks and tariffs, the newspaper and the caucus," may, as Emerson says, "rest on the same foundations of wonder as the town of Troy and the Temple of Delphos," but, personally, I am more susceptible to Troy, or even to the Chateau d'If, than I am to banks, of which useful institutions Marseilles contains a number, all very handsome and imposing. This is, perhaps, a matter of temperament and training, or it may be that mine is one of those "primitive natures" for whose "weak and childish imaginations," as Mr. Howells phrases it, such unrealities are a necessary stimulant. It is true that I might, if I chose, shelter myself under the generous mantle of Dr. Johnson, who was known to say that "the books we read with most pleasure are light compositions which contain a quick succession of events"; but, after all, this was but the expression of the Doctor's personal preference, and of no more weight than are the words of living critics, who share, or who don't share, his opinion.

"A good cause," says Sir Thomas Browne, "needs not to be patron'd by passion, but can sustain itself upon a temperate dispute"; and if scornful words be unneeded—and unheeded—in matters of moment, they simply run to waste when poured out over trivialities. We are asked to take everything so seriously in this unhumorous age, to talk about the novel as a "powerful educational agency," and to discuss the "profound and complex logic of reality" in a short story of mild interest and modest wit. This confuses our sense of proportion, and we grow restive under a pressure too severe. Yet who shall say that the public, big, amiable, and unconcerned, is not grateful for every readable book that strays into its path? Romance and realism, the proven and the impossible, wild stories of youthful passion and sedate studies of middle-aged spinsters, tales of New England villages, tales of Western towns, tales of Scotch hamlets, and tales of the mist-lands beyond the mountains of Africa, are all welcomed and read with avidity. The novelist, unless he be inhumanly dull, is sure of his audience, and he waxes didactic in the fullness of prosperity. When the Rev. Mr. John Watson (Ian Maclaren) wrote *Beside the Bonnie Briar Bush*, the book went straight to many hearths and many hearts. It was not an epoch-making work by any

means, but its homely pathos and humor insured for it an immediate hearing and most comfortable returns. The critics united in its praise, and the publishers gave us at once to understand how many copies had been sold. Why then did Mr. Watson, to whom the gods had been so kind, lift up his voice in a few short months to say supercilious things anent all schools of fiction save his own? The world is wider than Scotland, and local coloring is not humanity's one need. It will be long ere we believe that the art of story-telling began with *A Window in Thrums*, or that *Beside the Bonnie Briar Bush* marks its final development. Let us rather remember with gratitude that Mr. Barrie, an artist too versatile to be intolerant, has recorded, in place of delicate self-analysis and self-congratulation, his sincere reverence for Scott, and Dickens, and Thackeray, and Fielding, and Smollett, "old-fashioned novelists of some repute," whose horizon is wide as the sound of our English tongue, and whose sun is not yet set.

If we cannot have peace, let us then at least have a truce, as in the old fighting days, a truce of six months or a year. It would freshen us amazingly to hear nothing for a whole year about the "soul-searching veracity" of Tolstoï, and a great many timid people might pluck up heart to read that fine novelist, who has been rendered so alarming by his admirers. For a year the romancist could write of young people who marry, and the realist of middle-aged people who don't; and, in the renewed tranquillity of content, each workman might perhaps recognize the strength of the other's position. For youth and age and marriage and celibacy are alike familiar to us all. We have no crying need to be enlightened on these subjects, though we cheerfully consent to be entertained by them. "If the public do not know what books to read," says Mr. Lang very truthfully, "it is not for lack of cheap and copious instruction." We are sated sometimes with good advice, and a little tired of being educated when we want to be amused. There are days even when we recall with mingled regret and gratitude the grey-haired unknown author of *Aucassin and Nicolette*, who wove his tale in the humble hope that it might for a few brief moments gladden the sad hearts of men.

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